

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([00:43](#)):

Who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership? I'm Rabbi Liz Hirsch and I'm your host. Inspired by the story of Esther, I will invite women in leadership to talk about women and leadership. As CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, the women's affiliate of the largest Jewish denomination in North America, I am committed to sharing powerful stories of women who stand out in their fields, who have stepped up just for this moment. Each week I interview women who are influencing the world around them. My guest today is Micah Siva.

([00:56](#)):

As we look toward the end of the secular year and the conclusion of our second season of Just For This, we're approaching another holiday on the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah. My guest today, Micah Siva, is a chef, writer, and dietician. She works in the unique space of plant-based Jewish food. She thinks expansively about what that means, incorporating a variety of Jewish cultures and cuisines into her recipes. She's the author of the recently published cookbook, *Nosh: Plant Forward Recipes Celebrating Modern Jewish Culture*. As a vegetarian, I loved chatting with Micah about ways to make Jewish food more accessible for those focused on plant-based eating. As we look toward Hanukkah, our celebration of light in the darkness, Micah also shares her recent experiences, some of them challenging, as a Jewish author and public figure. She has wonderful wisdom and recipes to share with us.

Micah Siva ([01:57](#)):

I now live in the Chicago area, which is new as of this week. I'm originally Canadian, which we'll hear in my accent as I keep speaking. But I grew up in a Reform household. I work now as a food writer, recipe developer, food photographer, and I have a cookbook, a vegetarian Jewish cookbook that came out in March 2024. Prior to all of this, I was working as a dietician actually in Toronto. And then a series of moves led me to look for something that was a little bit different and a little bit more portable and not exactly client facing. So I started to get into food media and I specialize in vegetarian food, but my specific niche is Jewish vegetarian food, which is a niche within a niche, but it's been pretty fun.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([02:46](#)):

There are a lot of reasons I was excited to talk with you today. The first that I have to mention is I have a daughter named Micah also too. She spells it differently from you, but girl Micah, as I feel like stick together, and I am also a vegetarian, so I love the plant-based idea and I want to talk a lot more with you about that and how you came to that. And I would love just to hear how you got interested in plant-based cooking and vegetarian cooking and how you've seen that change over time that you've been a vegetarian yourself.

Micah Siva ([03:21](#)):

So I like to say every good Jewish girl I had stomach problems. And around 12 years old, like many other young girls around that age, I thought maybe I should go vegetarian and see if that helps my stomach problems. So when I told my parents this, they were very supportive and they actually hired a dietician who was also my third grade Hebrew school teacher, Rory Hornstein, shout out to Mrs. Hornstein to come over to the house to talk to us about eating on a vegetarian diet. Of course, that was a number of years ago, and in western Canada. So the options at that time were really just beans, nuts, seeds, lentils. You could get rice and soy milk if you were lucky to find both of those. And that was pretty much the landscape of vegetarianism. But what that really caused me to do or caused my parents to say was,

okay, if you want to be vegetarian, great, but you have to make your own main course because we're not making multiple dinners every night.

[\(04:26\)](#):

So that was my first time having some independence in the kitchen. And it turned into, by the time I graduated high school and left my family, I was making most of our family dinners. So we were all defacto vegetarians because I was the one cooking. You really had to get creative, a being a 12-year-old not knowing what to do in the kitchen. So probably making a lot of suspicious dishes and weird combinations, but you also didn't have the product landscape that we do have now. And it's not like it was a taboo thing to do, but given where I grew up and the family that I was living in, I was really the only vegetarian. So it felt taboo. Of course, my bubbies and extended family didn't all understand what I was doing, but I think that's just a part of Jewish culture and our love for food and our love for feeding folks.

[\(05:16\)](#):

And when we're not sure what to feed someone, it can feel like an attack on your ability to show them love and affection. So since then, now I've lived in Europe and I've lived in the U.S. for coming on five years, which is pretty wild. The landscape from early two thousands to now in the vegetarian world, it's just exploded. And it's been so fun to see both as a long time vegetarian, but also as a recipe writer. And it's been really exciting to see how that's changed and who knew that there would be an appetite for a vegetarian Jewish cookbook. And to be able to do it on a larger stage to appeal to vegetarian Jews, but also just folks who are looking to eat differently is very exciting. And I think also there's more emphasis on what can we as humans do to help the planet. And that's another big part of the vegetarian curious, I'll say, who are just looking to reduce their meat intake to begin with. So it's been a really cool journey to see how vegetarian has changed from then to now. And now you can get anything as a vegan alternative. It's pretty cool.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:32\)](#):

Absolutely. I became a vegetarian when I was about 10 more for the environmental reasons. And even though there's been even further research, and we know that reducing, even just the eating of red meat or eliminating red meat from a person's diet is the single most impactful thing that an individual can do, right? There are a lot of things that towns and countries and society and the world can do to decrease their carbon footprint and impact on the environment. But reducing or cutting out red meat entirely is a personal thing that someone can do. And when I was a kid, even before that research was furthered, I knew that just more from the sense of eating animals, it was something that I didn't want to do. But I actually took a break from being a vegetarian for a few years when I was a young adult right after college because I was working and I was in a position where I was working at a lot of conferences, and the vegetarian meal was all the side dishes of the main meal without any other protein.

[\(07:39\)](#):

And about six months into that job, I just said, I'm really hungry. I have to hit pause on this for a little while. And I ate meat for a few years and it never quite sat right with me. And I was so thrilled when my husband and I decided that we were going to be vegetarians again together. First, that we could cook together and make that the ethic for our home. And also, just like you were saying, so many more options. It's for ingredients and also if you go out to eat on every menu, there's vegan options, vegetarian options, and now I think it's really not unusual. It's much more mainstream. And I have several family members who are vegetarian or vegan now, so when we gather for family holidays, we're the ones who are kind of eating together in that way.

Micah Siva ([08:32](#)):

Definitely.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([08:33](#)):

I'd love to know how you sort of came to think about the Jewish influences specifically and how Jewish culture shows up in your cookbook and in your recipes. And something that I know that you're attentive to is that there's not sort of one mainstream normative Jewish culture or type of cuisine because the Jewish diaspora is all around the world. So I would just love if you could talk a little bit about that.

Micah Siva ([09:05](#)):

I wasn't always specializing in Jewish cuisine by any means. I was actually quite nervous to do that because I thought it might pigeonhole me. I thought that maybe there wasn't a market and I thought it might impact my ability to get hired by other folks who didn't necessarily want Jewish voices around. When it was 2018, my husband and I had just moved to the UK and we were living in London, and I was very, very close with my maternal grandmother, Eva. My family's from Western Canada, and I got a call from my mom in the middle of the night to say that my grandmother had just passed away, and it was Erev Rosh Hashanah. So the logistics of the burial were quite quick because it was right before sundown, and then it was going to be Rosh Hashanah, and then you can't exactly bury someone during those times.

([09:54](#)):

So it was basically within hours of her passing, she was buried. So I couldn't get home because that's a 16 at least hour journey to get back. I didn't know how to cope with that. It was my first grandparent that I had lost. She was really someone that I used to cook with all the time growing up, and most of my memories of her revolved around her teaching me to cook in the kitchen. And so the only way I knew how to cope was making a dish that she would make every Rosh Hashanah, which was kreplach. And of course, I was vegetarian, so I made vegetarian kreplach, and I just made dozens and dozens. I wasn't making them for anyone. I got out of bed the next morning, I was like, I must make kreplach all day. It was at that time that it had kind of dawned on me that I enjoyed being vegetarian, but when it came to Jewish holidays, I always felt a little left out because our holiday meal was the centerpiece of the holiday.

([10:50](#)):

No matter what holiday was, it was like brisket, the chicken, the schmaltz, everything revolved around food. We were very much food is our Judaism. And I realized that I'd been missing out on some of it because I wasn't eating the same foods. And when it came to holidays that I was hosting, I'd make a vegetarian meal, but there wasn't necessarily much that screamed, this is the holiday because it's not like I was making brisket or a roast chicken, and I was just kind of making a nice dinner. And so I realized that I'd been missing that part of my culture and community and the way that I connected to my faith. So I started to just play around with it a little bit to say, how can I make the dishes that I grew up on that my grandparents made, that my mom still makes and make it in a way that makes me want to make it for generations and are ways that I can make it for my family?

([11:47](#)):

And so I started to play around with it a little bit more after that point and started to write a very cookbook proposal based around the foods that are Jewish in many ways, but with vegetarian alternatives. And so my family is primarily Ukrainian, a little bit of Polish, Russian mixed in. They're a little bit of British. My husband's family is a mix of Sephardic and Turkish and Romanian. So that

definitely influenced a little bit about how I write and how I view Jewish food. But at the same time, I lived in Europe for a couple years and we traveled extensively. And traveling is huge hobby and passion that my husband and I shared. We've been to over 50 countries together in 10 years, and it's been something that we always like to do when we're traveling is take cooking classes and learn about the Jewish culture there, and visit a synagogue, and go to the Jewish museums and learn.

[\(12:43\)](#):

So I'm very cognizant that Jewish food isn't just Ashkenazi food, especially here in North America. We think of Jewish food, we think of deli food, and of course that's a lot of the food that I grew up on. But when my parents first married, they actually lived in Israel for a year and lived on a kibbutz, and my mom's job was in the kitchen and my dad's job was killing chickens. So a lot of the food that I ate growing up was food that she learned to make on the kibbutz. And so there was a lot of different influences coming into my palate. Growing up, my favorite afterschool snack was olives and feta cheese. I wasn't eating "normal North American things." I was eating stewed okra and shaka and feta and homemade pita and homemade falafel when I got home. And so that's definitely shaped a lot.

[\(13:35\)](#):

And when you think of vegetarian food and the greater Jewish diaspora and the cuisine that fits in to different places around the globe, so much of it is inherently vegetarian. If you think of Israel is one of the most vegetarian-friendly countries in the world, because it's so easy to eat vegetarian, there's so many different ingredients that aren't as common in North American Jewish food and Ashkenazi Jewish food, and so many of its inherently vegetarian. And then I also think of the kosher laws. When you're eating a dairy meal, if you've just not served fish, you are having a vegetarian meal. We just call it dairy meal. I like to think that we're like the original dairy-free folks because we had weird whipped topping before anything else came out. And so I think it's hidden in so many of our recipes that there's so much vegetarianism in Jewish food, but it's not always labeled that way.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:32](#)):

Yeah, I think that there's a lot of sort of avenues and ways that make it easy to be a vegetarian in Israel. I've lived on kibbutz before, although I did eat a lot of that vegetarian fake schnitzel, maybe a little bit more than I would want to. And I do remember one night when dinner was just artichoke, and that was a wake up call for everybody, whether we were vegetarian or not, that we wanted a little bit more on our plates. But I think that that's amazing about what you do is sort of bring the creativity of it, of how are you eating a full meal together and having something that is well-rounded and balanced for everyone. So I'd love to hear, you were mentioning about holidays as well too, and we know that Hanukkah is coming up, but any holiday that's on your mind where you would think about how do we take a classic recipe, something that we're thinking about doing and make sure that it's plant-based, and in line with the ways that you want to cook and that people are looking to eat?

Micah Siva ([15:35](#)):

Well, first of all, I like to always reiterate that just because you want to try something vegetarian doesn't mean you have to completely abandon a recipe that means a lot to you. Food is such a powerful emotive thing that if your grandmother made brisket every year for Hanukkah and you want to keep on that tradition, then that's amazing. Maybe instead of buying a six pound brisket, buy a four pound pound brisket and make an extra side dish that's vegetarian. And back to your point about reducing intake, if we can see our meals based around vegetables with meat almost as a side dish, that's a really great way to make an impact without feeling like you have to be vegetarian. I don't want anyone to feel

like they have to do anything. And so even small changes add up. But for my personal Hanukkah menu, I love making my savory tofu and pulled mushroom brisket. When I had my son, he's just over a year old, and he came right before Hanukkah last year. So when I came home from the hospital, my mom actually made that from the manuscript that I had shown her of my book that she had been editing with me. So she made that, and it's actually based on my grandmother's brisket marinade. I believe that every good brisket starts with ketchup. Personally, I feel like it's the Jewish law. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure it's in the Talmud.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([17:03](#)):

No, I think that's law for sure.

Micah Siva ([17:06](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, it's a hundred percent a commandment. So it starts with a very similar marinade that my grandmother made her brisket with cheap red wine, ketchup, mustard powder, thyme, garlic, and I add some other things to make it a bit more savory and umami rich. And then I use pulled trumpet mushrooms and grated tofu. So it is just a really savory filling and rich dish, which reminds me of brisket, and it gives me those same food memories of smelling my bubbe's brisket in the oven. So that's definitely something that I like to make for holidays because it's something a little bit different that people aren't always expecting. Thinking about holidays too, of course, with Hanukkah coming up, we have our classic, so in the book, I have vegan sufganiyot, I have vegan latkes, and then looking at different cultures across the diaspora, I also make these little rice-based "latkes" that are inspired by Tadig, the Persian rice dish.

([18:08](#)):

So getting that really crispy rice layer and it's flavored with saffron and has currents and pistachios, and I like to top it with a little cucumber cilantro, salsa. So there's lots of different ways to celebrate Hanukkah. And I also have learned over the past, gosh, nine months I think, of promoting the book that people sometimes want to try a new variation of their family recipe, but sometimes they just want something completely net new to bring to the table. And so that's where that rice latke really comes in where they're saying, this person is my designated latke maker, and it's like their uncle, my uncle Ted was our designated latke maker, and he's not going to change his mother's recipe. No way. But I can bring something a little different. That's a great way to open people up to trying something new and surprising people to say, "Hey, vegetarian food or vegan food is actually really delicious," and if I didn't tell you if it was vegetarian, you wouldn't even think about it.

([19:09](#)):

And when it comes to family meals as well, I've really based a lot of my dishes on being like a salad with protein or a main dish with protein, so that if that's all you can eat at the dinner table, you'll still be okay. And that's been my goal, especially with, I have a roasted chickpea Moroccan carrot salad, if that's all you can eat at the dinner table. You have your protein, you have your vegetables, you have some carbs, and a vegetarian will be happy with that. And because it's more than just mashed potatoes that they're pray don't have chicken stock in them or schmaltz. So that's kind of how I wrote the book around holidays, but also how I navigate my own holidays. If I'm going to someone's house, I'm always bringing something like a vegetable or a side dish that also has beans or some sort of protein in it. So I know that I'll say, that's great. I'm making this ps, I'm already going to add some vegetarian protein so you don't have to worry about me, and I can eat the side dishes and a dish with protein because I know that it stresses people out when there's a vegetarian at the table.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([20:16](#)):

Yeah, exactly right, that someone could feel both welcome at the table, but also empowered to bring something that they can eat and share with other people. I think that's really awesome.

Micah Siva ([20:28](#)):

And it's funny, when I was writing the book, I thought that my main demographic and customer would be people like me, people in their thirties, vegetarian. But I've really learned that a big demographic that I didn't know I had were parents of people like me, like my mother, and people who are saying, my son married a vegetarian, or my so-and-so is dating a vegetarian, and what am I supposed to feed them for dinner? Or, my daughter went vegetarian and I've never known how to make anything for her at the holidays. And it's a book to, I hope, bring families a little bit closer together. They can sit down to that meal again where maybe they couldn't in the same way before.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([21:11](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Women of Reform Judaism, the organization that I lead, is the umbrella for all the sisterhoods and the women's groups based at the synagogues. So I don't know if you had one at your synagogue growing up or have run into them, but there's this really strong legacy and history of each individual sisterhood, and some even do it to this day, of creating the sisterhood cookbook and collecting up recipes from all of the women, the members of the group, so that they could share the recipes with each other. And so that if they were having someone to their home, then they would have not just their own recipes, but they could have a broader volume to draw from. So I think you're really cooking and working and writing in that tradition. For sure.

Micah Siva ([22:01](#)):

Yeah, I've done a lot of sisterhood events. I'm doing one next weekend in Toledo. Nice.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:07](#)):

Great.

Micah Siva ([22:08](#)):

Yeah, I'm always at a sisterhood. The sisters love me.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:11](#)):

That's perfect. And I'm hopefully hear the podcast that more folks will want to invite you to come and join them. Something else that I wanted to ask you about, the theme for our podcast is based on the Purim story. On Esther's story. So I know we're just talking about Hanukkah. It's the closest holiday. Purim is a little bit far away, but in the scheme of things, we'll come in the series of Jewish holidays, and we often look at Esther and I talk with my guests about her through a leadership lens, of her stepping up just for this moment. She was the only one who was able to save the Jewish people when they were threatened by Haman. And we celebrate that by eating cookies that are shaped like his hat among other ways today. But I think that I'm reflecting on the work that you do as a form of leadership because it empowers people to be able to eat in the way that they want to eat. But I'd also love if you could just share with us something that you love, maybe from the cookbook that's related to Purim, to broaden out the holidays that we talk about, especially with that being the focus of this podcast.

Micah Siva ([23:17](#)):

Yeah. Well, I first of all love the overarching theme of Queen Esther because of course, she was a vegetarian so that she could keep kosher and hide her identity. And I think Purim is also such a great time to try a vegetarian dish because of that, to honor her in a different way. And so we honor what she did by making jest of Haman, but I think that we can also honor her by eating a vegetarian or bean-based meal or something like that.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([23:44](#)):

I love That's so great. We haven't thought about that before, but it's so true.

Micah Siva ([23:49](#)):

And I think that when it comes to Purim, it's actually one of my favorite holidays. I feel like people kind of turn their noses up at hamantaschen because they're often getting dry, crumbly, way too big, apricot hamantaschen from a deli that are never that good.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([24:08](#)):

Yeah, I am not really a big hamantaschen fan I have to say, because I feel like maybe I haven't eaten a good one yet. But yes, I agree. They're not what I would go for as my top sweet.

Micah Siva ([24:20](#)):

I love them. It was something that I always did with my mom and grandma. We'd always make hamantaschen every Purim and give them out, and we would make poppy seed ones, prune-based ones, chocolate ones. We'd make all sorts of different ones. And the one that I have in the cookbook is a vegan Funfetti hamantaschen. March is also my birthday month. It was something we often ate around my birthday, so I made them kind of like my own birthday cake hamantaschen, and they're filled with a really rich cashew cream filling, and they're soft and cakey, and they're not crumbly and they're not dry, and they're just, they're really fun. And of course you add sprinkles and it's fun for kids to get involved as well. And then I do think that any of my recipes would fit really well with Purim, especially maybe my carrot chickpea salad.

([25:11](#)):

That's a nice kind of springtime salad as well. And I think it was that Queen Esther also ate a lot of poppy seeds. And I'm a big poppy seed lover, so I also have a cookie called Moon Cookies, like a poppy seed, very light, almost like a tea time cookie that my great grandmother used to make in there. So whether it's my moon cookies or the hamantashan, both great ones. And also some people eat kreplach during Purim as well, and I actually put poppy seeds in my kreplach fill, so they also have that kind of shape of a triangle as well. So lots of ways to celebrate Purim. And of course, I have a whole chapter on cocktails, which is the ultimate way of celebrating the holiday.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:55](#)):

That's great. And also something that I love about Purim is the mitzvah, the commandment of shalach manot, of sending gift baskets to friends, which I know that it's fun to fill those up with lots of things, but especially food. So it really fits with a lot of what you've been talking about, about food as not just something to care for yourself and the way that you want to eat, but also to care for others and to create meals and food for others.

Micah Siva ([26:24](#)):

Absolutely.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([26:26](#)):

Something that I heard you speak about a little bit is the idea to choose to focus on Jewish recipes and to be very clearly identified as a Jewish plant-based cook and author. And we are in a difficult and challenging time period right now for the Jewish community. We're facing record levels of antisemitism. And that's actually another way that I know I relate to Esther, is she too lived in the diaspora and faced a significant level of antisemitism first to the point where she was hiding her identity, and then when she needed to reveal her identity, she did it at a risk to her own life because all of the Jewish people were being persecuted and could have been killed. So that's the backdrop for us as we think about the idea of speaking up and being publicly Jewish. I'm wondering, has this come up for you as you've written the book, published it, been on social media, been out speaking, is that something that you've had to deal with and interface?

Micah Siva ([27:35](#)):

Very much so. I started to focus on Jewish food. I think it was around mid to end of 2020. I was like, oh, there's that spike in antisemitism. Little did we know it was just the tip of the iceberg. But at that time, that's when I decided to focus my work and my voice on Jewish food because I felt like it was something that I could do to bring some sort of Jewish joy out there, and I felt like it was my duty to do something about it. So I actually switched my social media and my writing to the Jewish world. Within a month, I lost three long-term clients of food writing and food photography that I'd been working with, which was a huge blow, both financially and also I'd been working with these people between two to three plus years, consistently every month had formed really strong relationships with them.

([28:31](#)):

Then all of a sudden I switched my social media to Nosh with Micah and post something Jewish, and they all cancel their work with me. And I didn't know that that was also the tip of the iceberg. I was able to find other work and focus in on the Jewish things and get different opportunities. But especially since October 7th, well, even prior to October 7th, there was always the comments online and whatnot that I'd have to filter through and feeling like sometimes I was being passed up because of the Jewish aspect. And then after October 7th when October 7th happened, it was actually the morning of my baby shower. I was seven and a half months pregnant. Separating the two, they're both very emotional things, and the hate comments I started to get and the messages and the just vile things that were being sent to me. My husband at one point was like, you're not allowed to have your phone anymore.

([29:32](#)):

It's not safe for you emotionally. It's not safe for the baby for you to be in this volatile space. It is just not safe. And it was very difficult. And I think that it's changed whose hired me. It's changed whose gotten me to write things. On a different, more positive note, it's also brought the community together in different ways where I was, I guess my manuscript was done, the book was coming out for five months later, and I think it changed the interest of people to just get out and do anything community-wise. It's also meant that I've been working on, if it's at a non-Jewish space, how do I make sure that everyone is safe and secure? Do I have to get security? I alert the local police department of the cities I go to if it's a non-Jewish space. I had my launch party in Brooklyn, and it was at a Jewish deli, and I had made it into a fundraiser for Leket, and they didn't feel comfortable posting anything about my event because they didn't want their staff to be targeted.



[\(30:35\)](#):

Knowing that I was doing a fundraiser for Leket and I had to alert Brooklyn PD to let them know like, "Hey, can you get a couple more people on the block this evening? Because I'm doing literally a book launch party for a cookbook." Nothing happened, thankfully. But the fact that these are the hurdles that we have to go through to ensure that people can be safe when celebrating and safe when gathering, it's been really challenging. And I think that it's impacted a lot of people in the book space as well. And I know I'm personally working on another book proposal, and I know many other folks who have been writing Jewish books thinking, will I be able to get another book deal? Will a publisher want me? And it's been really, really challenging to keep, I guess, faith that it'll work out and that will be okay because at the end of the day, I still need to pay my bills.

[\(31:30\)](#):

I still need to pay for childcare. I need to make a living, but I also want to feel good about what I'm doing. And so it's been a really interesting time to have a Jewish book come out along with the Jewish baby and navigate both of those things side by side. And I mentioned I moved to Chicago area. It's been such a wild, emotional, difficult, rewarding time, and I'm very curious to see what the next few years bring. And hopefully it means that our hostages come home and our families are safe. But I also hope that it means that people realize that they've been misled a little, and that we are not the enemy. We just have really delicious food and like to eat a lot.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([32:25](#)):

I am your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, and you've been listening to Just For This. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim, LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior, and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelones wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moment next time.